

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

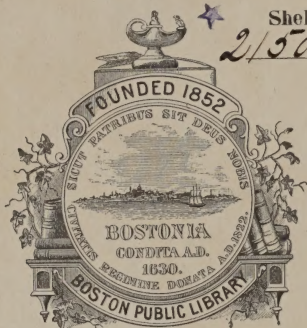


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NOTES

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ON SOME WRITING WHICH MAY BE

BY

SHAKSPEARE

IN THE

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

1889

c

NOTES.

TO THE TRUSTEES:—

The question recently asked by a correspondent in one of the city journals, whether the Boston Public Library possesses an autograph of William Shakspeare? has been referred to the Librarian for an answer.

This correspondent may have heard some rumor on the subject, or he may have assumed that, in the fitness of things, one of the largest and best Shakspearian collections extant ought to possess an original autograph of the great dramatist; for in the Barton collection, besides the four folios and many of the original quartos, together with nearly every edition known in any language, are to be found the original autograph Prospectus of the famous Boydell Shakspeare and the book of subscribers on parchment, which contains the signatures of George III., Queen Charlotte, the Prince of Wales, and many Shakspearian scholars.

Be this as it may, the Library undoubtedly possesses a signature and a single line which purport to have been written by Shakspeare; but whether they were actually so written is not susceptible of actual proof, nor, as I think, is it of absolute disproof.

It is a question of probabilities; and I propose to set-forth some facts and reasons which may assist in its determination.

When the genuineness of any handwriting is in question, the testimony of witnesses to the act, the judgment of experts, and the character and pedigree of the document are all admissible in evidence, and may be fairly required unless their absence can be accounted for.

The authenticity of the only three known autographs of Shakspeare about which it is impossible to cavil depends upon their pedigree. No one living ever saw him write them, or anything else, and there are no other specimens of his writing answering all the conditions of absolute certainty with which they can be compared. These three signatures are affixed to so many separate sheets of his will, dated March 25, 1616, shortly before his death, April 16, which was found where, if he made one, it ought to be found, in the archives of the Prerogative Office in Doctors Commons, in which it was duly proved as appears by the certificate of the proper officer, and where it has ever since remained. These facts reasonably preclude the possibility of forgery. Of two other signatures of which forgery is hardly predicable, though not

impossible, one is on the counterpart of a deed of a house in Blackfriars, purchased by Shakspeare March 10, 1613, now in the London Library, for which it was purchased by the city authorities for £145, in 1843. The other is on a mortgage of the same property, March 11, and was purchased by the British Museum, in 1858, for £315. The pedigree of these documents cannot be traced earlier than the middle of the last century, but both are enrolled in the proper office, and without doubt both are originals.

And so, I think, though it has been disputed, is the signature in the Florio Montaigne, Plate VII., purchased for £100 by the British Museum, in 1838. But this is without a pedigree before 1780, and its genuineness rests on the judgment of experts, and on comparison with signatures known to be original. These six signatures are shown in Plates V., VI., VII.

The Library signature has no pedigree, and is found in a volume of North's Plutarch of 1603, though it is not claimed that it was written in that book by Shakspeare as evidence of ownership, or for any other reason.

The history of the volume is this: It was brought to the Library, together with a first folio of Ben Jonson, in the autumn of 1880, by a Mr. Samuel Gasking, an Englishman from London, who claimed to be a proof-reader seeking employment, and said that he had several old volumes picked up in a London second-hand book-shop, which he was willing to dispose of at reasonable prices.

As the Library lacked these volumes they were purchased at something less than the prices usually quoted in English sale-catalogues. Mr. Gasking drew the Librarian's attention to a signature and other writing which he thought might be that of Shakspeare; but he did not seek to enhance the price on that account. After Mr. Gasking's departure, the Librarian carefully examined the Plutarch and the Shakspeare writing; and having been for many years familiar with autographs, ink and paper, European and American, from the time of Henry VII., he formed an opinion in regard to the writing in question, which was laid aside with a memorandum of the facts above stated.

It was laid aside; but it has now been taken up again, for besides answering as nearly as may be the question referred to above, the Trustees think that the Library ought at least to preserve in its printed documents the history of an inter-

NOTES

esting volume, together with the facts and reasons which bear upon the genuineness of the signature written as "Wlhm Shakspeare," and of the writing which follows it.

When this copy of North's Plutarch came to the Library, though it was complete, it was in bad condition. It was in the original binding, but the sewing had given way, the fly-leaves were gone, the text was considerably rumpled and otherwise so disordered that it was sent to the bindery for repairs, with instructions to preserve the original order of the contents.

The volume measures $12\frac{7}{8}$ in length, $8\frac{5}{8}$ in width, and $2\frac{1}{2}$ in thickness. The title-page much reduced in size, is seen on Plates I. and II. Those familiar with books — especially folios and quartos — of the seventeenth century need not be told that the inside of their covers often shows the boards, the lining leaves, if they ever adhered to them, having become detached so as to expose usually, as shown in Plates I. and II., first, a fold of parchment about two inches wide, running the entire length of the hinge; and, second, two or more paper leaves of the same width and length, all of which would be concealed from view if the lining leaf were pasted to the board, and would be exposed if it were detached. After examining many such volumes in the Public Library, the Librarian is in doubt whether it was customary to paste this leaf to the board, as is now invariably done, or to leave it loose to turn freely as a fly-leaf. It is also matter of common observation that the parchments and short paper leaves above described are generally covered with writing, often portions of legal documents which must have been written before the volume was bound, and which indicate by their general character that they were from scribes' offices.

When the Plutarch — which there is no pretence or probability that Shakspeare ever owned or saw — came to the Public Library, the strips of parchment and one of paper at the end of the volume were in their original condition, covering the full length of the hinge; but the others were short; that which contained the name of Shakspeare at the beginning of the volume being little more than half length, as is shown in Plates I. and II. Possibly it was no longer when the volume was bound. In repairing the volume all these parchments and short strips were placed outside of the new lining and fly-leaves, as is also shown.

The paper bearing the name of Shakspeare is a fold organically a part of the volume, as appeared by the sewing, when it was purchased by the Library; but at what time Shakspeare's name was written in it is a more important question.

The strips at the end of the volume contain writing which must have been there when the volume was bound. The words

quod natura dedit
tollere nemo potest,

in Plate IV., apparently a parody on

Quod natura negat, reddere nemo potest,

from Cor. Gallus Maximianus, Eleg. V. 54, are so near to the hinge which they face that it is not likely — even if it is possible — that they were written after the book was bound. The words "Cur honor quaeris," a part of two lines not easily read, seen in Plate III., may have been so written — though it is hardly probable that they would have been written in such an out-of-the-way place.

These writings and the name of "Wlhm Shakspeare, hundred and twenty pounds," though not in the same ink, are in the ink and handwriting of the seventeenth century, and probably — certainly, if the linings were ever pasted to the inside cover — were concealed from view until the linings became detached. From these circumstances it is probable that they are very old, — anterior in date to any of the known forgeries, — and that they were placed where they are now found at a time when there was no inducement to forge them.

There is another circumstance which bears — though not conclusively — upon the age of the writing. In Plates I. and II., a worm-hole may be seen in the parchment, as well as on the title-page, corresponding to a similar one just before the word "and" in the words "hundred and twenty pounds," which penetrates three hundred and ten pages of the text. This in itself establishes nothing, unless we first learn the date of the perforation; but at whatever time the worm worked, it is clear that it was after the writing; for if it had been before, the pen would have caught on the edges of the hole and caused some irregularity of line, which is firm and sharply defined on both sides of the aperture.

It may also be observed that the position of the writing in the volume is unusual — not in the place where the owner of the volume would have chosen to make a memorandum, nor a forger who wished to deceive.

The question still remains — is it an autograph, and is it Shakspeare's?

The answer depends on circumstantial evidence: —

1. The volume itself bears date 1603, and was probably bound many years before Shakspeare's death.

2. The paper which bears the signature is

part of the original constitution of the volume, and is of the same date as the binding.

3. The ink with which the signature was written, in the judgment of experts acquainted with modern inks manufactured to resemble those which are old, is genuine ink of the early part of the seventeenth century; and if so, then,

4. The signature itself must have been written in that century, though at what time it is impossible to say, but before the parchment, the signature, and the text had been perforated by a worm.

5. In the judgment of three experts, — collectors of autographs with long experience in such matters, — the writing is an autograph of some one who called himself William Shakspeare. That is to say, it is an original signature; not one man's name written by another, nor an imitation. The value of such expert judgments depends on the skill acquired by their possessors, which enables them, as it does bank-tellers, dealers in coins, art connoisseurs, and others, to detect the genuine from the spurious upon grounds which they are not always able to explain, but which, nevertheless, they, and others who employ them, rely upon in matters of considerable importance, pecuniary and otherwise.

6. The signature itself bears a strong resemblance to the known genuine signatures of Shakspeare; and where it departs from them, the fact may perhaps be accounted for by the time when it must have been written by him, if genuine.

Of course it is possible, though it does not seem at all probable to the experts who have examined it, that the writing may have been an entry made by some other person in some connection with the name of Shakspeare. It possesses too many of the characteristics of his autograph to have been that of a scrivener. It need not be said that the handwriting of the people of any age and country possesses certain characteristics in common. A good illustration of this is found in Shakspeare's will itself. The name of William Shakspeare as written in the body of the will by the scrivener is in some respects quite like Shakspeare's autograph; and so, though in less degree, is the filing endorsement of the clerk of the Prerogative Court. But no one familiar with genuine autographs would mistake either of these for such; still less would an expert be deceived by any of the imitation inks. They are aware that color, and other indicia of antiquity, may be imitated; but not in such a way as to deceive those skilful in detecting such imitations.

Forgeries to a practised eye show the weakness

of imitation, as in No. 8, Plate VIII., one of Ireland's forgeries. They are of different degrees of skill; but none of that degree which deceives a thorough expert. The copyist of an autograph, as the copyist of a painting, fails to catch the freedom of the original, and fatally errs, either by variation, or becomes stiff by servile tracing. Forgers generally deviate from the original so far as not to excite suspicion of tracing, but never needlessly raise questions by a wide departure from well-known and easily accessible originals.

In the Library signature there is such a departure, unaccountable if it is regarded as a forgery, and difficult to be accounted for if it is regarded as an original autograph. That will be considered hereafter.

It is not a very important consideration, but worth noting, however, that the writing in the book is found where Shakspeare himself would not have placed it, nor a forger have written it. If intended as evidence of Shakspeare's ownership of the volume, a forger would have written it where such evidence is usually found, at the top of the fly-leaf, or on the title-page, where Richard Hawkins wrote his name, as seen in Plates I. and II., and he would have avoided the unnecessary addition of the words, "hundred and twenty pounds."

We may reasonably say that the words "Wllm Shakspeare, hundred and twenty poundes,"

*quod natura dedit
tollere nemo potest.*

and "Cur honor quaeris," were written on papers contemporary with Shakspeare. They were also written in the ink and characteristic chirography of his time. How such papers, partly legal and partly literary, came together, is unknown. If, as has been suggested, they were from some scrivener's office, why should Shakspeare's name be found among them? It would hardly do to say that it is because, as has been conjectured from his familiarity with technical law terms and phrases, he was at one time a lawyer's clerk. Nor does the form in which the entry appears — that of underwriting on a policy of insurance — warrant the conclusion that the paper is part of such an instrument signed by Shakspeare, which found its way to a lawyer's office. It is not known that he used any of his capital in that way, though such a conjecture receives color from the familiarity with ships and sea-terms which his dramas show. But these papers are together, and apparently have been for nearly three centuries; nor is it more strange that one of them should be in the hand of Shakspeare than in the hand of any of his literary

contemporaries. Yet the question remains, did Shakspeare write his name and the words, "hundred and twenty pounds"?

This leads to an analysis of the writings and comparisons of them with those known to be Shakspeare's.

But before entering upon such an analysis it may be observed that the field of comparison of the Library signature with the known originals is narrow, being limited to those written between 1613 and 1616, all of which show such a lack of facility in handwriting as would almost preclude the possibility of Shakspeare's having written the dramas attributed to him, so great is the apparent illiteracy of his signatures. We have no specimens of his handwriting before disease, or the disuse of the pen, had apparently impaired that facility of writing which must be assumed as the acquirement of an author so voluminous as Shakspeare.

But although the range of comparison is narrow, it is better than if it were wide, since it shows that the five signatures, three of which were written on the same day, and all in the last three years of his life, vary greatly from each other; and these inconsistent variations from the same pen prepare us to expect even greater variations from specimens of an earlier period, especially if any should be found to be written in a freer hand. Toulmin Smith in combatting, against Sir Frederick Madden, the genuineness of the signature in the Florio Montaigne, No. 6, says that "all Shakspeare's 'S's' are begun from the right, take an easy sweep to the left, and so back to the right and to the left again, and then upwards; while this 'S' [in the Montaigne] is begun from the left, and gives us such an 'S' as never was seen." His meaning is seen in observing the formation of the "S" in Nos. 1, 2, and 5, and the difference is obvious. But is he not clearly wrong in respect to No. 4, written at the same time with Nos. 3 and 5?

One can hardly fail to notice that the writing of Shakspeare's name in the Library signature is organically the same as that in all the known original signatures, with certain variations from them, it is true; but yet not so great as those found among themselves. The real difficulty is between the first and last syllables of his name, in which there appears to be a superfluous "s." The "speare" also varies somewhat from that of the known signatures. In the best signature, — that on the last sheet of the will which was signed first, No. 5, — the "s" is apparently connected with the "k," as though he wrote it "ks." But this difficulty is lessened, if it does not disappear, after a careful examination of the formation of

the "k" in Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 5, in all of which there are certain resemblances to that in the Library signature, and in all the "s" is detached. With the variation in these respects in the three signatures written on the same day, it would be rash to found a judgment on that ground against the genuineness of the Library signature.

If the Library signature is genuine, then unquestionably are the words "hundred and twenty pounds;" and in that case the Boston Public Library possesses more of Shakspeare's writing than has been found elsewhere; and if those words are in the hand of Shakspeare, then is the signature also. A comparison of this line with Shakspeare's known autograph, therefore, may throw light on the main question. Take the letter "h" in the word "hundred." At first sight it appears to be unlike the four latest of the known original signatures, but is strikingly and organically like that in No. 1, the earliest of the originals. And yet if we notice the same letter as written in No. 2, only a day later, we may see what latitude Shakspeare allowed himself in the formation of letters.

Another striking instance of essential identity may be seen by comparing the "y" in the word "By," No. 5, with the same letter in "twenty," of the Library writing, No. 7.

Again, compare the letter "p" in the name "Shakspeare," with the same letter in the word "poundes" of the Library writing, No. 7. Though written by the same hand, no two letters could be more unlike; but the "p" in "poundes" is almost identical with that in No. 5, the most elaborate and best of Shakspeare's signatures, and either may be substituted for the other without violence.

Indeed, nothing can be more striking than the result of a comparison of the same letters in all the signatures of Shakspeare. No two are precisely alike, and in most instances they are very dissimilar; and yet, organically, they are the same in all, or nearly all. This fact suggests caution in coming to a judgment adverse to any signature on the ground that it varies from known originals. Whether it be a privilege of genius never to write one's name twice alike, even on the same day, such is certainly the fact with Shakspeare.

The comparisons instituted might be continued more exhaustively, but those who care to do so can carry them on for themselves.

The Librarian is familiar with the literature of historical, literary, and autographical forgeries in England and America, as well as with the devices of their authors to manufacture circum-

stantial evidence and to disarm suspicion. These devices have often imposed upon the unwary, and temporarily misled even those who ought at once to have detected the imposition. Such facts ought to prevent hasty judgments. Nevertheless, in the absence of positive proof, the testimony of experts, though not to be regarded as conclusive, must be accepted provisionally,

at least, as settling the question of probabilities.

In conclusion, the Librarian is clearly of the opinion that the Library autograph presents many reasons in favor of its genuineness, and too few objections to warrant an adverse judgment.

THE LIBRARIAN.

THE LIVES OF THE NOBLE GRE- CIANS AND ROMAINE, COMPARED

TOGETHER BY THAT GRAVE LEARNED
PHILOSOPHER AND HISTORIOGRAPHER,

Plutarke of Cheronea.

Translated out of Greeke into French by JAMES AMIOT Ab-
bot of Bellozane, Bishop of Auxerre, one of the Kings privie Counsell,
and great Amner of France. With the lives of HANNIBAL and of SCIPIO
AFRICAN: translated out of Latine into French by CHARLES
de l'Escluse, and out of French into English,
By Sir Thomas North Knight.

Hereunto are also added the lives of Epaminondas, of Philip of Macdon, of Dionysius the elder,
tyrant of Sicilia, of Augustus Caesar, of Plutarke, and of Seneca: with the lives of nine other
excellent Chiefes of warre: collected out of Amylius Probus, by
S. G. S. and Englished by the aforesaid Translator.



Handlins #

Printed at London by RICHARD FIELD
for GEORGE BISHOP.
1603.

TITLE-PAGE REDUCED, WITH THE PAPER FOLD AT THE HINGE, RESTING UPON IT, SHOWING THE SHAKESPEARE WRITING AND THE WORM-HOLE.

THE LIVES OF THE NOBLE GRE- CIANS AND ROMAINE, COMPARED

TOGETHER BY THAT GRAVE * LEARNED
PHILOSOPHER AND HISTORIOGRAPHER,

Plutarke of Chæroneæ.

Translated out of Greeke into French by JAMES AMIOT Ab-
bot of Belloxane, Bishop of Auxerre, one of the Kings privie Counsell,
and great Amner of France. VVith the liues of HANNIBAL and of SCIPIO

AFRICAN: translated out of Latine into French by CHARLES
de l'ESCLVSE, and out of French into English,

By Sir Thomas North Knight.

*Hercules are also added the liues of Epaminondas, of Philip of Macedon, of Dionysius the elder,
tyrant of Sicily, of Augustus Cæsar, of Plutarke, and of Seneca: with the liues of nine other
excellent Chiefes of warre collected out of Amylius Probus, by
S. G. S. and Englished by the aforesaid Translator*

Richard:

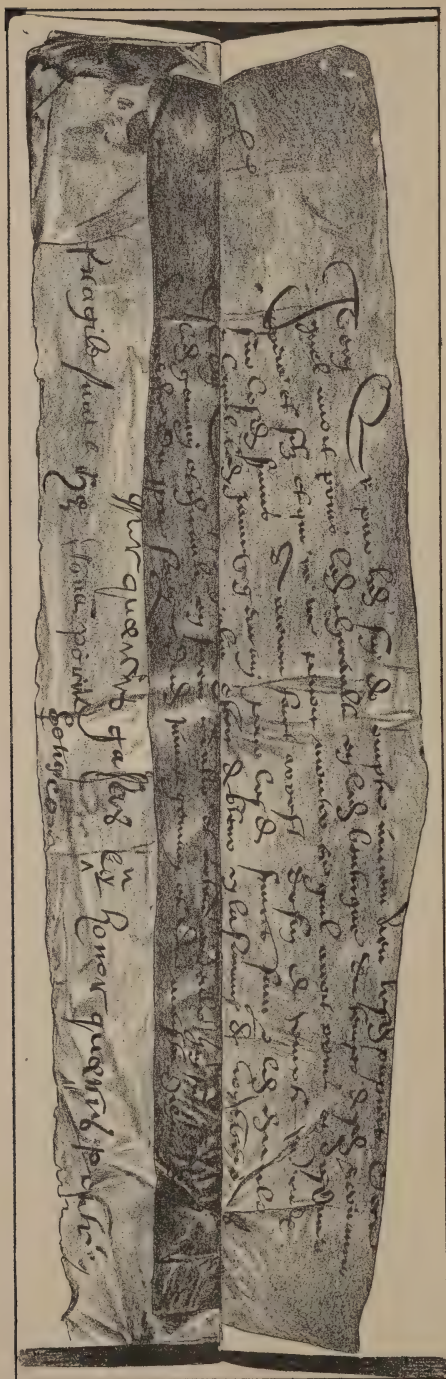
Hand's #



Imprinted at London by RICHARD FIELD
for GEORGE BISHOP.

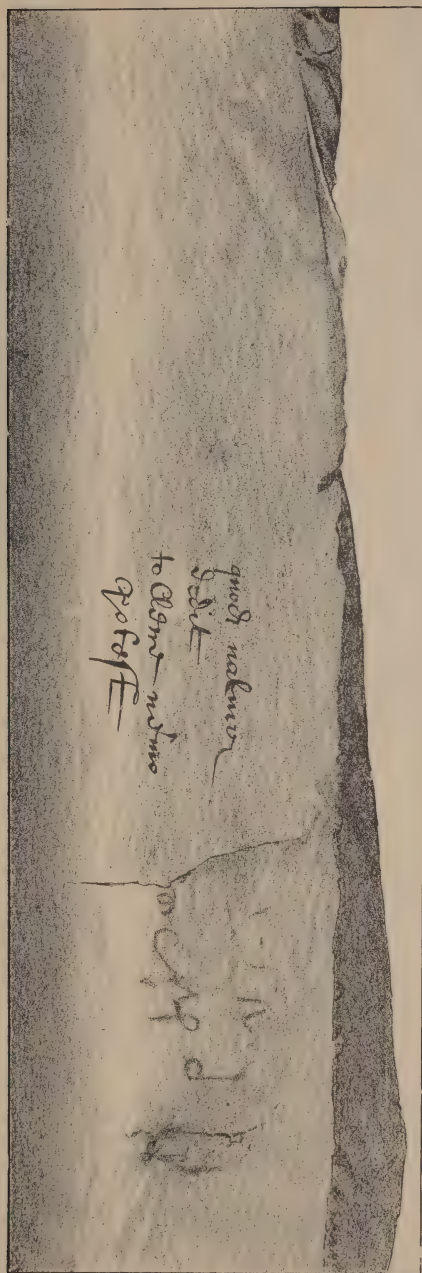
1603

THE TITLE-PAGE, SHOWING THE PAPER FOLD TURNED BACK UPON THE COVER, AND THE WORM-HOLE.



THE HINGE AT THE END OF THE VOLUME, SHOWING THE PARCHMENT AND PAPER STRIPS BEARING WRITING.

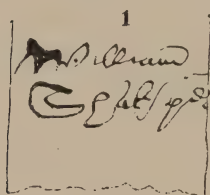
PLATE IV.



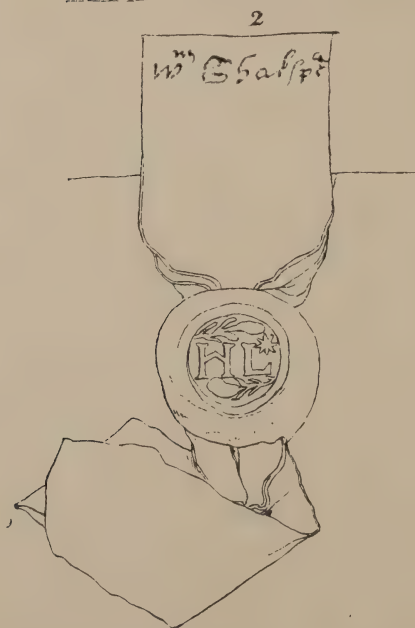
THE HINGE AT THE END OF THE VOLUME, SHOWING THE PAPER STRIP TURNED TOWARD THE COVER DISCLOSING WRITING OTHERWISE CONCEALED.

PLATE V.

William
Galt/pt



W^m Galt/pt



FAC-SIMILES OF KNOWN SHAKSPEARE AUTOGRAPHS, AND ENLARGEMENTS OF THE SAME.

3

William
Shakespeare

William
Shakespeare

Willm. Shakespeare

4

Willm. Shakespeare

282 Mr William Shakespeare

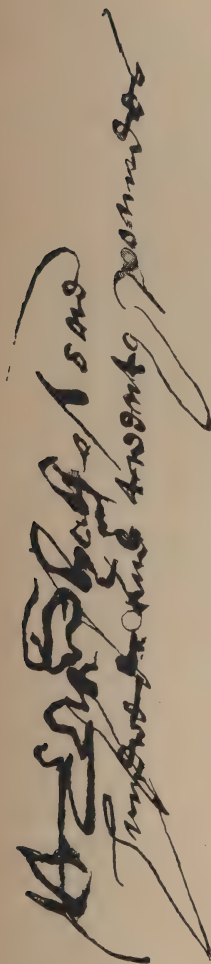
5

282 Mr William Shakespeare

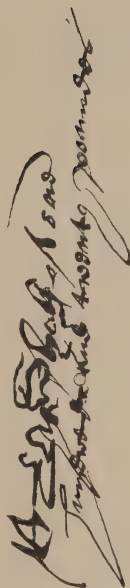
PLATE VII.

The image displays two versions of a handwritten signature. The signature is written in a cursive, italicized script. The top version is a smaller, more compact form of the signature. Below it is a larger, more detailed version, which appears to be an enlargement or a more elaborate fac-simile. Both versions consist of a single, continuous line of script. The signature is oriented vertically on the page.

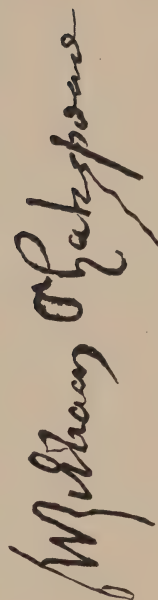
THE MONTAIGNE-FLORIO SIGNATURE IN FAC-SIMILE, AND ENLARGEMENT OF THE SAME.


 An enlarged cursive signature of William O'Connell. The signature is written in a highly stylized, flowing script. The first part of the signature, 'William', is written in a large, bold, and somewhat blocky cursive. The second part, 'O'Connell', is written in a more fluid, cursive style. The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

7 THE LIBRARY SIGNATURE AND WRITING, ENLARGED.


 A cursive signature of William O'Connell, shown at its actual size. The signature is written in a fluid, cursive style, similar to the enlarged version but with less pronounced letterforms. It is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

THE SAME, ACTUAL SIZE.


 A cursive signature of William O'Connell, shown at its actual size. The signature is written in a fluid, cursive style, similar to the enlarged version but with less pronounced letterforms. It is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

8 ONE OF IRELAND'S FORGERIES.

